

INTERNATIONALIZING GEOGRAPHY

INTERNATIONAL STUDENT PERCEPTIONS & EXPERIENCES IN UVIC'S GEOGRAPHY DEPARTMENT

2019 Report

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Overview

In an age when internationalization ideals are becoming more commonplace within higher education institutions, it is necessary to examine the experiences of international students that come to study and pursue degrees at Canadian universities. The aim of this report is to explore the experiences and perceptions of international students studying geography at the University of Victoria (UVic) to better understand how the ideal of internationalization is taking shape within UVic's Geography Department.

Most studies of international students are generally not discipline-specific. Rather, they often draw upon international student experiences across a diverse range of academic disciplines. By contrast, this study focuses specifically on the experiences of international students in the field of geography in order to enhance the internationalization process within UVic's Geography Department.

Why are International Students Important for UVic?

The enrollment of international students in Canadian universities has increased in recent years. Between 2010-2018, international student enrollments at Canadian higher education institutions increased by 154% to a total of 572,415 (Canadian Bureau for International Education, 2019). Across Canada, the majority of international students are enrolled in university programs in Ontario (48%), British Columbia (24%), and Quebec (12%) (Canadian Bureau for International Education, 2018).



At the time that the present study was conducted (2017-2018), there were a total of 21,000 students enrolled at the University of Victoria (University of Victoria, 2017). Of these, there were approximately 2,474 international undergraduate students and 897 international graduate students attending UVic, including 109 international/exchange undergraduate students and only 21 international graduate students enrolled in courses

in the Department of Geography. By contrast, the majority of international students enrolled at UVic were pursuing degrees in Economics and Business. This study seeks to document the perceptions of international students who have enrolled in Geography at UVic to provide insight into how the department can enhance the international student experience.

DATA & PARTICIPANTS

This study was conducted with approval from the Human Ethics Office at UVic and was funded with a Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) grant from the Learning and Teaching Support and Innovation Centre on campus. In total, 18 international students participated in the study, and approximately half of them indicated that they were hoping to stay and find work in Canada upon graduation. Table 1 shows a profile of the participants who volunteered to take part in this study. There were 8 male and 11 female participants, including 13 undergraduates and 5 graduate students. Given the comparatively small size of the international student population in the Geography Department, we have chosen to omit the country of origin on an individual basis for the students who participated in the study in order to maintain their anonymity and confidentiality.

Table 1: Profile of Participants

Year	Gender	Plans to Stay in Canada
1 st Year Undergraduate	Female	Undecided
1 st Year Undergraduate	Female	No
2 nd Year Undergraduate	Female	Undecided
2 nd Year Undergraduate	Female	No
3 rd Year Undergraduate	Female	Yes
3 rd Year Undergraduate	Male	Yes
3 rd Year Undergraduate	Male	No
4 th Year Undergraduate	Female	Yes
4 th Year Undergraduate	Female	No
4 th Year Undergraduate	Female	Undecided
4 th Year Undergraduate	Male	Yes
4 th Year Undergraduate	Male	Yes
4 th Year Undergraduate	Male	Yes
MSc Graduate	Female	Undecided
MSc Graduate	Male	Yes
PhD Graduate	Female	Undecided
PhD Graduate	Female	Yes
PhD Graduate	Male	Yes

KEY THEMES & FINDINGS: INTERNATIONAL STUDENT PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES WITHIN GEOGRAPHY

In this section, we outline key themes that arose from the interview data. The three major themes presented in this report focus on international students' perceptions of (1) the geography curriculum & course content, (2) interactions with geography faculty, and (3) interactions with domestic students.

✚ GEOGRAPHY CURRICULUM & COURSE CONTENT

○ DIFFERENT CHALLENGES WITH WRITING BY SUBFIELD

One key finding from this study is that there was a clear pattern among international students in terms of which subfields of Geography they decided to pursue and why. The majority of Chinese international students focused on the GIS and/or Physical Geography courses. All the other international students who participated in the study were taking a variety of Physical, Human, Human-Environment, and GIS courses. The Chinese students' rationale for this was that the Human Geography courses required too many in-depth writing assignments, and they seemed to be a preference for GIS and/or Physical Geography courses because this allowed them to do more technical lab report forms of writing rather than longer term papers, the latter of which they perceived were not an area of strength.



Sample of Interview Quotes

- ★ *I think the writing is different because you write down the report. Yeah, the report is very, I can say it's very organized. Yeah, you don't need to make very beautiful sentences. You just explain your idea or something very clear and every time it's just some typical structure and that's easy for me 'cause I have an idea, but I don't know how to make sentences beautiful. But that's pretty important when you write human geography term papers (4th Year Undergraduate Student).*
- ★ *Writing skills for like my reports, great, I think. For those courses more like language related, I have a couple like human geography courses. I think those, they need a higher writing level instead of those scientific geography courses, because I took a lot like geomatics courses, so, for those reports, they will focus more on your analysis and how you address your analysis and so if you follow an academic flow of writing*

reports, it's okay because they will not focus too much on writing skills, but for more like human geographers or arts geography, I think they will focus more on your writing skills...so like if you have bad writing, you are not able to express your opinions at all. So I normally got a lower score for those human geography courses report (4th Year Undergraduate Student).

○ CRITICISMS ABOUT INTERNATIONAL CONTENT

The majority of international students noted that they did not get enough international content specifically in their Physical and GIS geography courses. Most of the interviewees noted that the courses where international topics, themes, examples, and research were discussed in more depth were primarily in the Human Geography and Regional Studies courses. A few students suggested that most Geography courses were very Canada/BC specific with some room left for international content. What is also noteworthy is that at least 3 of the Chinese students noted that they did not think that international content was even necessary, especially in their Physical Geography courses, because they were here to acquire a Canadian Geography degree so international content was not deemed to be of necessity to getting the degree.

Sample of Interview Quotes

- ★ *Okay, so speaking of the course content, I liked the idea that the, my instructor, he came up with different approaches for resource management...he did a good job like bringing different papers from physical geographers, but also from human geographers and people like social science people. I really liked that and what I didn't like that much was maybe the lack of international examples of environmental issues or a little bit of lack of different perspectives from maybe the Global South. I think it would be a good point for me because I could see myself on those aspects, but also maybe also to my colleagues, my classmates, they would be able to see different examples of environment issues. Different countries and place (PhD, Graduate Student).*
- ★ *I think it's definitely useful because there are, not just me, but also a student from Colombia, so if we have more international examples, let's say maybe introducing some satellites from China and then introducing some work like the important work by international scientists. I think that would be more...eye opening for the students. So it can also be more attractive (4th Year Undergraduate Student).*
- ★ *I believe [the professor] always took some examples of local area, like what happened in Victoria and what happened in Alberta and Vancouver, like that. So I believe it would be better to have some international examples like what happened maybe in Europe like in Africa. That's more the stuff we learn in the lab (1st Year Undergraduate Student)*
- ★ *I feel like more like physical geography focused, had a more focus in Canada, like in a Canada scale, but human geography I feel like it's just all over the place...Geomatics, I would say more local region [i.e. BC] (4th Year Undergraduate Student).*

- ★ *I feel like the geography courses are very local and focused on Canada or even more specifically in the British Columbia side. Like I only learned like Canada geography rather than have like international or global view at the Geography Department. So it's more like a basic geography knowledge in class (MSc, Graduate Student).*
- ★ *First, an instructor could bring different culture especially in his class or her class, as examples...so I think that would be interesting for the Canadian students because they get to experience the examples other than North America. Yeah, but for me, I'm more focus on what I can understand from this instructor rather than where the examples are coming from (MSc, Graduate Student).*
- ★ *Physical geography. I don't know. I don't think it's necessary to have international professors because whoever teach it, is the same thing. Because it's physical, I mean...Not really. But human geography. I think it is important [to have international professors] in human geography, I think (3rd Year Undergraduate Student).*

○ **INDIGENOUS CONTENT, PROFESSORS, & STUDENTS**



All the international students who participated in this study pointed out that they did not receive much Indigenous content in their GIS courses. Almost everyone stated that they first learned about Indigenous knowledge and history in relation to Canada in their Human Geography courses. Some students also hinted at the fact that they did not see any Indigenous professors or came in contact with any Indigenous students in the department, which they suggested was a missing component in relation to teaching all students about Indigenous peoples.

Sample of Interview Quotes

- ★ *I think there's definitely a lack of acknowledgement of Indigenous knowledge or not just Indigenous knowledge but on ethnicities, like minority's knowledge and their issues (MSc, Graduate Student).*

- ★ *Like coastal community, but besides that, during other courses, I didn't get any Indigenous information or anything related to it...I didn't get it when I took GIS, No (4th Year, Undergraduate Student).*
- ★ *Not in GIS class, but in the required course such as 209. Yeah, I think 209 do talk about many First Nations (MSc, Graduate Student).*
- ★ *Geomatics is more about techniques related so, as far as I know, I don't think they give anything about First Nations (4th Year Undergraduate Student).*
- ★ *I got it in my 101B class. [The professor] emphasized heavily on Indigenous people in Canada and...talked about the government's lack of services to them and just care about them as a form of racism...In my 101A class, [the professor] talked about, I remember him talking about how like Indigenous people would be fighting certain pipeline projects and stuff....Even if the profs say certain things about what Indigenous people are going through, there's still like a huge disconnect between the professors actually knowing Indigenous people or any of the students being Indigenous (2nd Year Undergraduate Student).*
- ★ *But, in the end, it could be good work to maybe because we could speak, we spoke a lot about natives, First Nations, but I did not meet any of them. So, maybe it could be better to be introduced to them a little bit more because, yeah, we speak a lot about them, but I did not see many of them during my semester so I would like to, maybe it would be good to meet them a little bit more. Or to communicate with them in a way...In my perspective, I think the white and non-white people, maybe it could be improved more in the sense that First Nations could be a bit more integrated. I didn't see any First Nations teachers. I just, I don't know. Maybe it could be interesting if First Nations could teach some First Nations topics even for the Indigenous study, like First Nations study. I don't know it could be interesting to see (3rd Year Undergraduate Student).*
- ★ *It's weird to me that I haven't had an Indigenous professor because I'm sure that what they would teach you is completely different than what a non-Indigenous person would (2nd Year Undergraduate Student).*



✚ INTERACTIONS WITH GEOGRAPHY FACULTY

○ PROFESSIONAL, POLITE, & FRIENDLY

The international students that were interviewed for this study appeared to respect the expertise and knowledge of faculty members in the Geography Department. Every student described the faculty members that taught them in various courses as very polite

and professional. However, the majority of them also indicated that they rarely interacted with faculty members other than to discuss a grade, assessment, or assignment.

Sample of Interview Quotes

★ *She was really professional, too. She just want us to present the topics and stuff about that...She's really professional so she like makes us do the presentation...I consider her professional like the work (3rd Year Undergraduate Student).*

★ *Well I think all my professors I know, they all have very good personality. They're very polite, they're friendly, they're supportive. They're always saying like they want to support our studies in this class (4th Year Undergraduate Student).*

★ *I guess it just drags along and it's a bit, not hard to just go. I could do it, but I just didn't feel the need to go to his office hours and talk to him about whatever, you know? Like nothing related to the course material. Or I could have used the course material as an excuse to talk to him, but I never got the chance. No (4th Year Undergraduate Student).*



○ HUMOUR & FAMILY MAKES SOME APPROACHABLE

For the most part, faculty were perceived as friendly. When asked why certain professors were more approachable, participants explained that they added humour to their teaching styles and often talked about family to the students during class as well.

Sample of Interview Quotes

★ *Very like welcoming and like respectful. Like welcomed questions, very personable, made jokes with the class. When she would ask questions, she would wait for someone to answer so she really wants people to be engaged. Yeah, I mean I was just with her five minutes ago and she was laughing and she knows my name and I would say just a very personal teacher (1st Year Undergraduate Student).*

★ *Yeah. I think [the professor] felt more approachable to me, just because he was laughing all the time and after every class, we would always come up and talk to him and, even when I walked by his room, there were students just like in there and I saw*

him waiting out here too and he like smiled at me and said hi (2nd Year Undergraduate Student).

- ★ *I found [the professor] quite approachable because in class he always said, come and see me whenever. Just knock on the door, I'm always around, and I think he give a bit of background to himself which just made it a little bit more, made him feel more approachable...At the start, he mentioned his child and he occasionally brings his child up in conversations which makes him more approachable, I think (2nd Year Undergraduate Student).*



○ FACULTY & DISORGANIZATON

One of the major criticisms of faculty was that international students found some, but not all, faculty to be disorganized in their presentation of lecture topics.

Sample of Interview Quotes

- ★ *So he knows his stuff. I think he didn't prepare it. He kind of just talked the whole class. Yeah. It just a little bit unorganized because he just has several slides in the class like open and unopened, maybe opens video, open a website (MSc, Graduate Student).*
- ★ *It's like materials are all over the place and then if you like go to class and then you would know like what this is about and then this material is under this content and then like you will know that, but if you like miss a class and you go to his slides and it's not really helpful because it's too messy. But I guess it's not a good thing for me because I really have to like organize my things and then I wonder what's going on (3rd Year Undergraduate Student).*

○ FACULTY TREAT US JUST LIKE CANADIAN STUDENTS

Several international students pointed out that the faculty treated them just like Canadian students, which was a bit more challenging for them especially in terms of expectations that they could automatically follow along with the pace of lectures and background knowledge about Canadian history and culture.

Sample of Interview Quotes

- ★ *I just didn't feel there's well maybe extra support or like some teams for people who are not familiar with Western culture, Western background. They just leave us to figure out the thing. They treat us the same, like we are at the same level. We know the same saying as domestic students. So I had to spend more time and effort to figure out what maybe just something, some examples. So the material does not really*



have a balance to let the international student to understand, it's more like, okay, I assume you already know this, this comments, this knowledge. You feel you're not being payed attention to. They're not aware you're an international student or you're a foreigner (4th Year Undergraduate Student).

- ★ *I had the feeling sometimes, he didn't notice that I was not Canadian or English speaker. He really treated me like a Canadian, so he was speaking really, really, really fast and about hard topics, about some things that can be really hard to understand, and we had this really fluent discussion and sometimes I was like focus on what he's saying, but it could be hard to understand everything (3rd Year Undergraduate Student).*

INTERACTIONS WITH DOMESTIC STUDENTS

- **CANADIAN STUDENTS ARE FRIENDLY, BUT IN A SUPERFICIAL WAY**

The majority of international students described their interactions and experiences with domestic Canadian students rather negatively. A few of the international students who were either American or from parts of Europe suggested that they found it much easier to become friends with Canadian students, but most of the other international students suggested that it was more challenging, especially the Chinese international students. Most international students also hinted at the fact that Canadian students were friendly, but in a superficial way, and that they were often too busy to interact with them and some did not want to interact with them at all. Canadian students were often described as ambitious and independently driven for success and so often did not have time to spend working with international students.



Sample of Interview Quotes

- ★ *Yeah, in general, the attitude in general, I felt at this university was friendly, but not that much. Like, I don't want to be mean or rude but the institutions I had the feeling like friendly but not, just all, not like really friendly. It was like a bit reserved and attitude in general in class and outside of the class. Like people are generally shy and reserved and... I feel a bit lack of emotion, yeah I can say. Like work, work, work and money, work and sometime like had a feeling we forget other stuff. Yeah, that's my feeling (3rd Year Undergraduate Student).*
- ★ *It's understandable because these students pay a lot of, they pay a lot of money to go in the class, but so maybe they just want to be efficient and try to be the best for the class. I feel it's a bit of selfishness sometimes....It's not like helpful, like people will help each other. Sometimes these things happen. It can happen in some universities (4th Year Undergraduate Student).*
- ★ *First glance, they were dry. Like serious and focused on their own thing. But as you get to know them, or as you talk to them a few more times, they're very friendly. Like you just have to break that first wall, right? (4th Year Undergraduate Student).*
- ★ *Not in the sense that they look for conversation. It's more in the sense of, you know, questions about the class or the building. You know, the simple doubts, the questions that people have, that everyone has, I guess, but not in the sense of getting to know someone or me (4th Year Undergraduate Student).*

○ **CHALLENGES WORKING & SOCIALIZING IN GROUPS WITH CANADIAN STUDENTS**

Lastly, some Chinese students indicated that they always had to take the first step to interact with the Canadian students in their courses, but they often felt ignored. They appear to struggle making friends with Canadian students both within and outside the

classroom setting due to language barriers. Others described negative experiences with regards to working in group activities/assignments with Canadian students.

Sample of Interview Quotes

- ★ *I mean, when we were giving a group project, I was in a group with other four Canadians and we discuss and we have meeting and I try to say hi to one of the girl. Like when I met her, when I met him, met her at school, but otherwise like after the project, we just, we just became, I mean, I became like a stranger from them again. I could see them sometimes hang out together and it's just weird (3rd Year Undergraduate Student).*
- ★ *I don't drink and when I came to UVic, but then I feel like, okay, it's everytime I refuse to go to the pub with them, like I not drinking, it's so hard to make friends, so then I start to drink. I didn't drink much but, okay, I have a beer, but I be with them and drink (4th Year Undergraduate Student).*
- ★ *When my English was not very good or I didn't find how should I get along and be social with other people. So, I really feel very lonely because like when I walk into the class, people will say, 'oh, this is the Chinese girl and she probably don't speak very good English and they just don't sit beside me.' So really, I just sit alone and because there's not many international students or Chinese students taking human geography class. I would say I really don't have like many friends at the beginning and people, like one thing I feel is really challenging is the group work cause people have a lot of concern like, okay, I don't speak English well. I don't write English well. I don't really know the Canadian stuff very well. It's probably really hard, would take more time to work with me. So sometimes they just don't want to be in my group or they just like, okay, I do everything and you just, they just yeah (4th Year Undergraduate Student).*
- ★ *I remember one time I was doing a group project and we had a group presentation in class and the girl at the beginning, she just kind of like really afraid to be in one group with me and she asked the teacher should I join other group? Rather than to be in a group with me, but the teacher said no because they're happy to be pairs and she's kind of really depressed because she left, she had to be in my group and I brought the emails to her and I try to like meet up with her and talk about the presentation and I did my part. She never replied and on that day during the presentation day and she came, she didn't talk to me, she didn't even look at me and show me a paper and highlight all the lines and said read it. Well with those already stand on the stage in front of everybody and she throw at me the paper and said read it. She never speak with me and said that and I was like so scared. I couldn't even know what she wrote and I feel like, okay, I do*



everything. I send my draft, I sent my part of the presentation, I said, okay, it's too much. I don't want to do it and I read it because I think this is group work. If I'm very insist, I have to do my, I want to read my part, it was going to be disaster because all that time, my English is not enough to explain everything and I don't think in the class that we had the time to explain everything and I don't want to embarrass her (4th Year Undergraduate Student).

- ★ *Like no big things, just little petty things that come across that makes me a lot, very stressed. I think most of my classmates we've been taking the same classes in first year and I just have a feeling like, we know, I know them, all of them and some of them I even know their names but I just can't talk to them and I know like a lot of them recognize me as well, but I just feel like myself just like air, invisible or something. Sometimes when I'm at the GIS lab, some people will ask me questions and then when they saw me again, they just, they just, I don't know if they forgot about me or anything, but never like say anything (3rd Year Undergraduate Student).*

PATHS FORWARD TO INTERNATIONALIZE GEOGRAPHY

Based on the findings for this study, below we propose a number of potential steps forward that could be taken to better enhance the academic and social experiences of international students pursuing degrees in the UVic Geography Department:

1. The department could improve its recruitment efforts to encourage more international students to select Geography as an academic major at UVic.
2. International students seem to be more drawn to the Physical and GIS subfields, so the department could consider how it can attract and expose international students to the Human Geography and Human-Environment subfields as well.
3. Variations in the amount of international content in Human, Physical, Human-Environment, and GIS courses suggest that faculty could be more conscious of exposing students to more international examples, themes, and scholarship in their courses across different subfields of the discipline.
4. All the Human, Physical, Human-Environment, and GIS courses could improve upon their Indigenous content. The GIS courses received the most criticisms in terms of course content lacking in Indigenous knowledge (with the exception of the Community Mapping course).
5. International students indicated a lack of effort and comfortability approaching faculty. As faculty, we could consider how to balance between academic learning and social contact with students that could enhance their learning and improve intercultural relations.

6. Faculty could consider personalizing their courses so that students feel more comfortable coming to visit them during office hours. Internationalization efforts involve intercultural learning so faculty are key agents in fostering cross-cultural engagement.
7. The department could potentially consider hiring international faculty as this could encourage more international students to see Geography as more international and globally-minded.
8. The department could develop strategies to improve interactions between international and domestic students. The degree of negative experiences expressed by international students in this study suggests that they were not satisfied with their social experiences in the Geography Department. Faculty could consider ways to bridge the gap between international and domestic students to encourage cross-cultural learning and interactions.
9. Getting the SOGS students to reach out to international students in Geography could be an avenue to build stronger friendships with domestic students.
10. The department could encourage international students to become more involved in departmental affairs, including creating a committee of international students to periodically provide input related to international student experiences and challenges within the department.

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